

The Littlest Viking

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About the Author

Also by Sandi Toksvig

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About the Book

A wonderfully funny tale from the award-winning writer and comedian Sandi Toksvig.

When Amber, the littlest viking, set out from Scandinavia to seek her fortune, she must have lost her way! Now she's in Pegwell Bay with no one but her pet squirrel for company. Katie, Gary and Joshua find her stranded on the beach and decide to look after her. Now there's a Viking living in their garden!

Having a Viking in the family isn't always easy. But when the garden is threatened by a nasty neighbour, Amber has some unusual – and hilarious – solutions to their problems. . .

The Littlest Viking

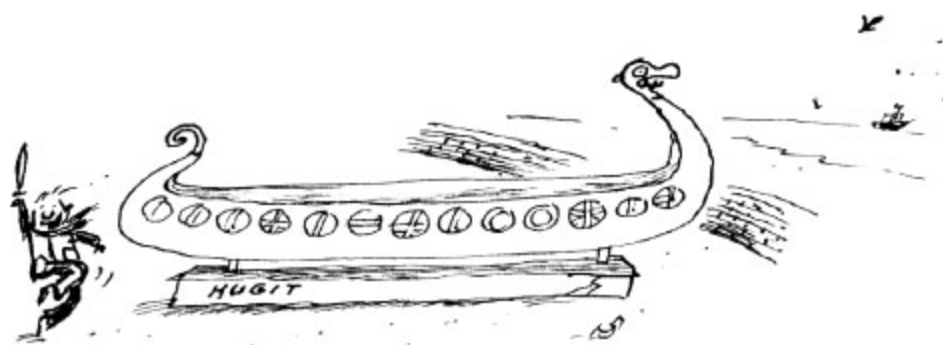
SANDI TOKSVIG

Illustrated by Georgien Overwater



CORGI YEARLING BOOKS

To Jesse and Meg



Chapter One

Mist Over Pegwell Bay

PEGWELL BAY HAD something you don't see very much these days. It had a Viking ship. A huge Viking ship. Longer even than the longest bus. It was decorated with dozens of coloured shields along the sides and a great dragon head at the front staring out to sea.

In Viking times, which were so long ago that even the oldest person you know probably won't remember them, Norse warriors sailed the seas in splendid ships like the one at Pegwell Bay. It took fifty men to row one of these magnificent craft across the swelling waves, as the Vikings made their way from the burning deserts of Africa to the freezing waters of the Arctic Circle – all without the help of a map or a decent travel-sickness pill.

Today, however, this particular Viking ship – the *Hugit* – wasn't going anywhere. It had been put on concrete blocks by the council years ago as a tourist attraction and now it looked rather forlorn and defeated. As if it had been wheel clamped by a particularly keen traffic warden. On this cold winter afternoon, it wasn't even attracting any tourists.

The only person to show any interest in the ship was Joshua, who was six and didn't have an opinion about the council yet. He was quite pleased that the ship stood still. It meant he could run around it with his plastic sword, shouting and banging his chest as if he'd just landed an advance party of Norsemen on the shore. His older brother and sister, Katie and Gary Lloyd, looked on from the top of the hill overlooking Pegwell Bay. Even standing in the shelter

of the long-closed *Eric the Red Sip 'n' Snack Shack* didn't stop the cold wind from last night's storm biting into their faces.



'Do you know why there're no moles living under the grass here?' asked Gary, pushing his hands as far as possible into his coat pockets and wishing that he wasn't too cool to wear gloves.

'Because it's winter and it's too cold.' Katie was the oldest and the most sensible.

'No. Too much blood,' said Gary darkly. 'When the Vikings came and attacked Pegwell Bay there was such a battle here that blood and bones covered the entire field. It was

soaked red as far as you could see, and since then no mole has ever dared poke its head up through the ground.'

'Don't be silly, Gary, nobody ever fought anything here. It's too boring. I bet the Vikings just came, took one look round and told the locals they could keep it. All we've got now is a Pitch and Putt course, and if the Vikings had been here in winter, even that would have been closed.'

In front of the shack, the wind flapped a rickety wooden sign advertising BURGERS MADE WITH REAL NORSE MEAT. Anybody who'd ever tried one thought it was a spelling mistake. The wind whipped up the road lifting the light tarpaulin someone had placed over their car and written FOR SALE on.

Joshua ran up to join Katie and Gary. 'Let's go down on the beach and see if we can find anything exciting,' he shouted. 'There might be washing-up.'

'Washing-up? What d'you mean, shrimp?' asked Gary. He was nine but very nearly ten and he felt that Joshua ought to be a little more in awe of him.

'From the storm, last night.'

Katie interpreted. 'He means there might be things washed up on the shore after the storm.'

Gary shook his head in disgust. 'Washing-up! If I were a Viking I'd sail away from here.'

'If you were a Viking, you'd have been dead a thousand years,' replied Katie, and headed off to the beach.

By Thor it was so cold. Nobody with any sense would have gone down to the beach that afternoon. On a fine day, a few keen dog-walkers might have been out on the seafront at this time of the year, or perhaps you'd have caught sight of Mr Patterson pacing up and down and looking out to sea. He ran the Pitch and Putt in the summer and was always at a loss as to what to do with his time during the winter. Today, however, even he had found something better to do and Pegwell Bay was completely and utterly deserted.

Joshua ran on ahead, with Gary being more careful because he was wearing his new trainers and he liked to admire them as he walked. The beach itself was covered in flotsam washed up from the bad weather. Flotsam is a good word. It means anything that has ended up in the sea by accident and then washed ashore. Today that meant cans and bottles, old plastic bags and even the right leg from a shop window dummy.

‘Here’s something, here’s something,’ shouted Joshua, picking up a large yellow stone. Gary thought it unlikely Joshua had found anything interesting. It looked like any yellow stone. Joshua moved it to show his brother and sister but as he did so the strangest thing happened. The yellow colour of the stone began to turn blue.

‘Let me see that,’ said Gary. As he grabbed the stone from Joshua’s hand and turned it for a better view, the stone once again became yellow. Even Gary was impressed. He turned the stone again and again. Each time it turned blue, then yellow and then blue again.

‘Whatever can it be?’ asked Katie.

Just then, as if in answer to her question, the children thought they heard something in the howling wind.

‘Det er min. Jeg skal brug de til min rejse.’

Gary shook his head and listened again. Slowly the sounds became clearer. It was a voice, getting louder and louder.

‘Det er min. That’s mine. Jeg skal brug de til min rejse. I shall need it for my journey.’

The children huddled together. They looked round, but there was no one there.

‘I need it for my journey,’ the voice called again.

‘Who’s that?’ whispered Joshua, wishing he’d remembered to go to the bathroom before they came out.

‘I don’t know,’ Katie hissed back.

Now Joshua really did need to go to the loo. His big sister, Katie, normally knew everything but she didn’t know what

the stone was and now she didn't know who was speaking either.

Gary looked around at the white cliff-face of the bay that circled round beyond them. Although he had been to the beach a hundred times he noticed for the first time what looked like the entrance to a small cave.

'I think the voice is coming from that cave,' said Gary, pointing.

Joshua had started hopping from one foot to the other. 'Why don't we just go home for a while,' he mumbled, 'and come back some other day? I need to go—'

'Oh, come on,' interrupted Gary.

The children made their way up to the sandy shore. Gary, who was enjoying being in charge for a change, had forgotten to step carefully so as not to mess up his trainers. Joshua shifted nervously from foot to foot, now desperate to pee, while Katie wished she wasn't twelve and the oldest and could run home. As they drew near, the cave entrance looked dark and forbidding. Joshua began shaking. He'd heard that dragons liked to live in dark caves. Now even Gary stopped in his tracks. He had been as brave as he could, but he had also just remembered reading something about smugglers with guns hiding in caves.

'Who's there?' he called out softly, so as not to wake anything that might be hiding inside.

'I am Grettir, conqueror of trolls and ghosts!' thundered a voice echoing in the cave. All three children would have run away there and then, but somehow their feet wouldn't do as they were told. Even stranger, each one felt that they must have blinked for a moment, because at first no one was there, and then suddenly a small girl seemed to . . . well . . . fade into view. She stood in the cave entrance and looked at them. Gary, Katie and Joshua forgot all their manners and stared back. And Joshua even forgot that he needed to go to the loo.

In front of them stood the strangest little girl they'd ever seen. She was no bigger than six-year-old Joshua but she wore the most peculiar clothes. She had a brown dress with woollen leggings, leather shoes that didn't look like they'd come from the high street and a hood with a long streamer of material down her back. The dress was pulled in tight around her chubby waist with a leather belt in which she'd stuck a small sword. A miniature blue cloak hung from her shoulders and on her head she had a grey metal hat that looked like the upturned end of a large bullet. Two small blonde plaits stuck out below either side of her helmet, and around her neck she wore a leather chain with a small silver hammer hanging from it.



'Say something, Katie,' gulped Gary, pushing his sister forward.

'Uh . . . you're not from round here, are you?' managed Katie in a high-pitched voice.

‘Maybe she’s from the grammar school,’ suggested Joshua, who knew that the grammar-school pupils wore a fancy uniform.

The small girl scrunched up her face into the fiercest expression she could manage.

‘Beware, for I am the great god, Grettir, conqueror of trolls and ghosts,’ boomed the little girl in a surprisingly loud voice, which could have earned her a good living selling strawberries at Pegwell market.

Joshua thought for a moment and then spoke. ‘Sorry to be rude but I don’t think you’re big enough to be a god.’

The little girl eyed him suspiciously.

‘Alright,’ she boomed, slightly less confidently.

‘How about, “I am the witch Gullweig, mistress of evil magic”?’

The children all thought for a moment.

‘I still think you’re pushing it a bit,’ said Gary.

The strange girl nodded. ‘So, you’re going to be tricky, eh? Let’s see . . . Would you believe I was a great Viking hero come from fighting hordes of giants in the east?’

The children looked at each other and shook their heads: ‘No.’

‘Oh.’ The small girl ploughed on. ‘A *little* Viking hero come from fighting a few giants? . . . OK, *one* giant? . . . Alright. A small Viking, not a hero at all, come from home and got a bit lost really and . . . oh . . . oh . . .’ And with that, the little girl sat down and began to weep.

‘Now look what we’ve done,’ said Joshua. ‘We’ve made her cry.’ Joshua had more sympathy than the others with people who’d been made to cry, as it happened rather too often to him. He marched over and put his arm round the girl, while Gary, who hated crying, wandered away for a moment.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Joshua.

‘A-A-Amber,’ she stammered through her tears. ‘I am Amber, Ha . . . Ha . . . Hammer of the Nn . . . Nn . . . North.’

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Katie, approaching slowly.

‘I got lost in a storm and my boat was smashed up and I can’t get home and I’m hungry and I don’t know what to do . . .’ blurted out Amber, and she began weeping again.

‘What were you doing in a boat on your own?’ Katie knelt down next to Amber.

‘I wanted to go to Vineland and fight trolls with seven heads and find a great kingdom and win untold riches to bring back for m . . . m . . . Mother,’ Amber mumbled.

‘Vineland? I think she’s taken a bit of a wrong turning,’ said Joshua.

Meanwhile Gary was poking around in front of the cave. He was astonished by what he found. Pulled against the wall was the world’s smallest Viking boat. Well, what was left of it. It had all the same fittings as Pegwell Bay’s Viking ship but all in miniature. Two little oars lay cracked and splintered next to a single red shield. The front of the boat had a whole chunk missing and several of the planks which had held it together lay broken. Amber stood up and came to look at the ruined boat.

‘It’s hopeless. I don’t think I can fix it.’ She sighed.

Gary tried to shift the boat away from the wall to get a better look, but it was far too heavy.

‘Here, let me.’ Amber reached out with one hand and moved the entire vessel over.

‘How did you do that?’ asked Gary in complete amazement. ‘It weighs a ton.’

‘I may be little,’ said Amber, ‘but I was the strongest girl in our village. When I was on my father’s boat I could leap over the gunwale and bound from oar to oar as his men rowed. If I met a troll . . . which you know, I haven’t yet, but if I did, I could chop off its head with a single stroke of my sword and it would be no tougher than cutting through butter. I could do anything, ’cause I’m strong.’

‘I bet you miss your mum though,’ said Joshua.

‘Yes, yes . . . I do,’ admitted Amber, and she dissolved into tears once more. Gary patted her gently on the back and then coughed and moved his hand when he realized what he was doing.

‘Gary, Joshua, come here,’ said Katie, beckoning them away from the cave. ‘Now, we’ve got to be sensible about this. What do you think we should do?’

‘I still need to go to the . . .’ said Joshua.

‘Not that,’ replied Katie, getting irritated. ‘Who is she?’

‘Maybe she really is a Viking,’ said Gary slowly. ‘I mean, there’s the boat and everything. And her clothes look a bit, er, Vikingish . . .’

‘Well, Viking or not, we can’t leave her here. The tide will be in soon. We’ll just have to take her home.’

The three Lloyd children lived with their mum in a rather run-down terrace. The houses had once been very fine indeed but were now in need of what the local estate agent called some ‘slight modernization’. The Lloyds lived in the end terrace, so their mum always said that their house was ‘actually semi-detached’. Most of the people in the row had lived there for a long time. Some of them were very nice, some were a bit strange, and some were very strange indeed.

They were an odd sight walking home, the three children and a miniature Viking. Then Amber made things stranger still when she picked up the beached plastic leg from the shop window dummy and insisted on carrying it on her head saying, ‘It’s the very thing I shall need.’

What was curious was that the little group passed several people on the way home and no one said a word. Actually no one even seemed to notice. The children were nearly home when they saw their next-door neighbour, old Mrs Marchmont, flicking her duster out on the balcony.

‘Quick, hide,’ shouted Gary, pushing a rather bewildered Amber down behind a stone wall.

‘Is it a troll?’ asked Amber, jumping back up, both excited and nervous at the prospect of finally meeting one. Instead of looking surprised, old Mrs Marchmont stared right at the spot where the small Viking was standing, said nothing and went back into the house.

‘She didn’t see you!’ exclaimed Gary, peeking up over the wall. He looked at Amber. ‘This is very odd.’

‘Oh nonsense, Gary,’ said Katie. ‘Mrs Marchmont didn’t see that tree when she borrowed Mum’s car either! Don’t you remember? All the same, we’d better be careful. We don’t want anyone to see Amber.’

‘Why not?’ asked Amber.

‘No pets,’ explained Katie. ‘Mrs Marchmont runs the Residents’ Association and she’s very clear about that. We’re not allowed to keep pets.’

‘A Viking isn’t a pet,’ said Joshua. ‘A pet’s a cat or a rabbit.’

‘I don’t know.’ Gary leaned against the wall. ‘If she sees Amber she’ll have the council round and Mum won’t like that. We need to think.’

Joshua, Katie, Gary and Amber went and sat in the bus shelter across from their front door.

‘I think I have made a very important journey,’ announced Amber after they’d all sat in silence for a while. ‘What was it like just before I arrived? Were there whirlwinds and flashes of lightning and fiery dragons flying through the air?’

‘I suppose it was a bit misty,’ said Gary.

‘And there was a funny noise this morning three doors up at Mrs Gray’s,’ added Joshua.

‘That’s her washing machine,’ said Katie knowledgeably. ‘She has endless trouble with the spin cycle.’

‘I came across the *Gunningagap* – the great void,’ continued Amber, ‘the abyss of emptiness, the *Niflheim*, the land of dark and freezing fog to journey here to . . .’

‘Pegwell Bay,’ said Joshua helpfully.

‘Pegwell Bay,’ repeated Amber. ‘Have I come to the end of the earth?’

‘No,’ said Katie. ‘It just feels like it in winter. Are you hungry?’

Amber nodded. ‘I could devour an ox, eight salmon and three cups of mead in a single meal.’

Katie went inside and got her a small cheese sandwich and half a packet of prawn-flavoured crisps. She struggled back to the shelter carrying the food, along with a large red bundle. ‘I found this,’ she said.

‘It’s our old play tent!’ exclaimed Joshua, excited at the prospect of a new game. ‘We could set it up in the garden.’

Gary shook his head. ‘We can’t leave her in the garden. It’s freezing.’

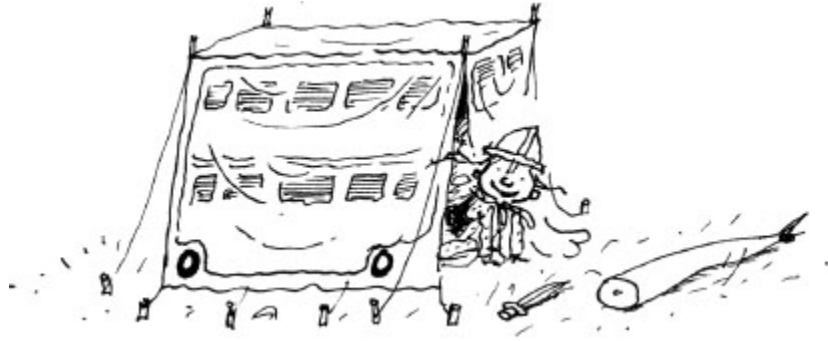
‘She is a Viking,’ replied Joshua. ‘I think they must be used to the cold. Eric the Red was a Viking and he went to Greenland, which isn’t green but is very cold.’

Katie was firm. ‘We can’t take her in the house. Mum will know straight away. She knows if you bring in some mud never mind about someone from history.’

Amber was looking carefully at the play tent. ‘I believe this may be the very thing I shall need.’

The children led Amber round to the back gate and into the garden. She still clutched her plastic leg as she munched crisps and wondered how potatoes could be made so flat and why they tasted so strange.

In a clearing among some bushes, Katie set to work and, after making a fuss about which way the door should be facing, Gary lent a hand. Before long, they had put up their old play tent. It was bright red and shaped like a London double-decker bus. Amber peeked inside.



'A house, you've made a house!' she cried, delighted, and crawled inside.

'Do you like it?' asked Katie, laying out an old blanket for the floor. 'I thought you could stay in here for the moment.'

'It's wonderful. It's the very thing I . . . ' Amber lay down on the blanket, cuddled her shop dummy leg and instantly fell asleep.

'I suppose she's had a long journey,' said Joshua.

'Of course she has,' said Gary. 'Must be at least a thousand years.'

The children went inside for tea, passing Mrs Marchmont, who was on her way out.

'We've got a Viking in our garden,' shouted Joshua, who had terrible trouble keeping a secret.

'Get out of my way!' barked Mrs Marchmont, sweeping past to post her weekly letter of complaint to the *Pegwell Bay Chronicle*.

Down in the garden, in the clearing in the bushes, Amber the littlest Viking snuggled down in her tent. She was dreaming of sailing across the oceans by the stars and cutting off the heads of a nine-headed troll – who looked remarkably like Mrs Marchmont – just as easily as slicing through butter.



Chapter Two

From Bad to Verse

IT HAD BEEN a very strange morning in the Lloyd household. Katie, Gary and Joshua had tried to act as if it were just another day – as if they hadn't found a small Viking girl called Amber on the beach yesterday afternoon and as if she weren't now living in the garden. They knew their mum wouldn't believe it, and, to be absolutely honest, they weren't completely sure that they hadn't imagined it themselves.

The three children ate their breakfasts without being told, cleared their plates away without discussion, and not one of them put up a decent fight over the free pencil rubber shaped like a vampire that had come with the cornflakes. This should have been enough to make Mum suspicious that they were up to something except that she was too busy thinking about the post. There had been a phone bill and a red reminder from the gas board. Even worse, she'd just read a letter from Gary's teacher, Mrs Johnson, saying that if he didn't stop reading comics in school and start doing his homework, then something very official would have to happen.

'We might . . . pop out, Mum,' said Katie, trying to sound casual.

'Oh, I don't care if we go or not,' added Gary, shining the tops of his trainers with the carpet.

Mum looked at Gary. 'We need to have a talk about school, Gary. You've got to work on your reading.'

‘Not now, Mum,’ said Joshua. ‘Amber will be starving and . . .’ At this, the two older ones lost their cool and picked Joshua up between them and left.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ shouted Gary over his shoulder. ‘Got to go.’

Mum sighed the way only mums can. The frost was still crunchy under their feet as Katie and Joshua ran down the stone steps into the large garden behind the row of houses where they lived. Gary followed more slowly, sliding along on the especially icy bits of the path.

‘Stupid school,’ he muttered to himself. ‘What’s wrong with comics anyway? It’s reading. They’ve got words in them.’ Gary kicked a lump of ice. Of course he hadn’t done this week’s homework. Mrs Johnson wanted him to write a *poem*! How could *anybody* find that interesting?

Still muttering to himself, Gary caught up with the other two. There, hidden away in the bushes stood the small red play tent shaped like a bus, in which Amber, the Viking they had found on the beach, had spent the night. Joshua ran up and lifted the flap to look inside.

‘She’s gone!’ he cried.

‘Oh dear!’ said Katie, disappointed. ‘We should have taken her inside yesterday.’

‘Perhaps she was never really here at all,’ wondered Gary.

‘No, her leg’s still here,’ said Joshua, giving his brother and sister a nasty turn until he pulled out the plastic limb from a shop dummy that Amber had picked up on the beach the day before.

‘Morning,’ came a voice booming through a mulberry bush. ‘Look what I found. The very thing I needed.’ Amber stood before them, holding a milk bottle. ‘The gods have left milk as an offering for my great journey.’ She examined the bottle carefully, for she had never seen a milk bottle before. ‘Must have been a strange cow that made this.’

‘Amer, where did you get that?’ asked Katie, half afraid of the answer.



‘From a great doorway with a terrible metal face that tried to frighten me but did not, for I am brave and sturdy. I am Amber, Hammer of the North.’ The miniature Viking smiled and began drinking the milk from the bottle.

‘Mrs Marchmont’s door knocker!’ Katie and Joshua whispered together.

‘Mrs Marchmont’s milk!’ said Gary. They all knew that Mrs Marchmont, their next-door neighbour, could be spectacularly bad tempered when she wanted to.

‘You mustn’t take that,’ said Joshua. ‘It’s naughty.’

‘I don’t think you’ll stop a Viking by telling them that they’re naughty,’ explained Gary. Sometimes he wished that the others wouldn’t be quite so feeble, though he was also hoping that Mrs Marchmont didn’t actually know where they were.

‘We thought we’d imagined you,’ said Joshua.

Amber pinched herself. ‘No, I’m definitely here,’ she beamed.

Amber finished the milk with a great flourish and put down the bottle. ‘Come, we must get on.’

She looked up at the sun. ‘It’s already late. Sleep is the great thief; he will always steal half the time. I have a mission I must complete.’ With that, she set off through the

bushes and across the garden. There was nothing for it but to follow.

‘Where are you going, Amber?’ asked Joshua.

‘Amber, we need to talk to you,’ Katie panted, trying to keep up. Amber was really only the size of a large doll, but she walked as fast as Mr Patterson darting out from his hut on the Pitch and Putt course when he spied visitors cheating at the windmill on hole number nine.

‘We’ve got to decide what to do,’ Katie said.

‘We must hurry,’ replied Amber. ‘*Skinfaxi* is already riding fast across the sky and we must find *Ratatosk*.’

‘*Skinfaxi*? *Ratatosk*?’ The children were totally bewildered.

‘*Skinfaxi*, the Horse of the Day,’ said Amber. ‘Don’t you have teachers and learn about things?’

Joshua was running behind Amber and even Gary was having trouble keeping up with her as she reached the top of the road to the beach, but Amber strolled on.

‘Everyone knows that there was once a giantess called Night who had a son called Day. The gods gave each of them a horse-drawn chariot and sent them up to drive round the heavens. Night goes first. Her horse is called *Hrimfaxi*, which means “frosty mane”. As darkness falls, Night tightens the reins on *Hrimfaxi* and each morning the face of the earth is wet with foam from the horse’s mouth.’

Gary looked down at the dew on the grass, and trod a little more carefully in his new trainers at the thought of walking on foam from a horse’s mouth.

Amber ploughed on. ‘Day’s horse is called *Skinfaxi* or “shining mane” and his horse brightens all the earth and sky with the shininess of his hair. We must find *Ratatosk* while *Skinfaxi* rides high above us.’

By the time they reached the cave, the children were completely out of breath.

‘Who’s Ratata . . . Ratati . . . whatever you said?’ called Joshua, but Amber had already rushed inside.

‘Maybe it’s some pony who rides out in the afternoon,’ said Gary, slumping down on a rock, fed up with the whole business.

Amber reappeared with a small squirrel sitting on her shoulder. ‘*Ratatosk*. He’s my friend. In all the excitement yesterday I forgot to bring him with me.’ The tiny grey creature looked at the three children and then jumped up onto Amber’s head and stood on his hands. He waved his feet in the air and chattered in a high-pitched nonsense voice. After a moment he slipped back down onto the little girl’s shoulder and clapped his hands.



‘He wants you to clap. He thinks he’s very clever,’ said Amber, rubbing Ratatosk’s head. Katie and Joshua began to clap and the squirrel immediately stood on his head again. Even Gary couldn’t help thinking that this was the best thing he’d seen since he’d watched a video on *YouTube* of a dog that could skateboard. He began to laugh. Katie, however, tried to contain herself and be sensible again.

‘Amber,’ she began in a voice she had learned from her mother, ‘do you really mean to tell us that you have sailed all the way across the North Sea on your own with nothing but a squirrel for company?’

Amber nodded. ‘You know what they say – if you travel alone at least you get on with your companions.’

‘But how did you get here?’ asked Joshua. Amber sat down on the ground while Ratatosk began playing with a large shell.

‘I sailed by the stars and used my sunstone in the day. Here, look.’ From her pocket Amber pulled the yellow stone that the children had found on the beach the day before. ‘This is a sunstone. When you hold it like this, it’s yellow, but if I hold it at a certain angle to the sun it turns blue. By looking to see when the stone turns blue, I can always know my angle to the sun and journey in the same direction. At night I follow the Great North Star, Polaris.’

Joshua had never heard of such a thing. ‘Don’t you have a map or sat nav?’

Amber shook her head: ‘Vikings don’t need maps. All the glowing sparks and cinders in the sky point the way. Don’t you know these things? I mean, don’t you have any learning?’

‘I go to St Joseph’s Infants’ School,’ said Joshua proudly, ready to explain that he was rather a dab hand at the Plasticine table.

‘I hate school,’ said Gary, who was thinking about Mrs Johnson and her dreary old poetry.

‘But you must learn your runes,’ said Amber earnestly.

‘Runes?’ asked Joshua.

‘The ancient, magical letters of the gods.’

‘Huh.’ Gary was unimpressed.

‘They say that if you learn the runes you can find words that put the sea to sleep, put water on fire and calm an aching heart. When you know them you can write anything. They are the gift of Odin, the god of poetry.’

‘Poetry!’ Gary almost spat the word. ‘That’s soppy. It’s the pits!’

‘Don’t tell Odin that,’ replied Amber. ‘He’ll get cross and he’s very powerful. Odin is the god of warriors. He has only one eye. He is the fiercest of them all, but he is also the god of poetry. Do you know, he loves words so much that even when he was wounded, he still hung from the windswept branches of a tree for nine days and nights just to discover the secret of writing.’

Gary thought about himself spending just five minutes in a warm classroom before giving up on the secret of writing.

‘Here, look,’ said Amber, picking up a stick and beginning to trace shapes in the sand. ‘Each one of these shapes is a letter. This one is for the sound F, this one is T.’

‘It’s an alphabet!’ cried Joshua.

‘I don’t know what that is’ – Amber continued drawing – ‘but I do know that with these you can either spell words or they can mean whole words on their own. This is “cattle”, this is “man”. Oh, and look, Ratatosk has done the one for “giant”!’

‘Hmmm,’ said Gary, still trying to be unimpressed but annoyed that even the squirrel had the hang of it. ‘Just a bunch of drawings really.’ Nevertheless he watched carefully as Amber traced out the rest of the alphabet of the gods.

For several minutes, there was complete silence. Then Joshua suddenly spoke. ‘I need to go home,’ he said urgently. Needing to wee always came as a complete surprise to him, and once again he had that desperate look in his eye.

‘And I’m hungry,’ announced Amber, getting to her feet.

‘I’ve got two pounds,’ said Katie. ‘We could get some chips from the pie shop.’

‘Is it many leagues from here?’ asked Amber as they headed back to the road.

‘No, just on the corner,’ replied Katie.

The next morning the children were late going out as Mum had wanted their bedrooms tidied. When they finally got down to the tent, Amber was nowhere to be found, though her beloved leg from the plastic dummy was still there.

‘She’s probably getting Mrs Marchmont’s milk again,’ said Katie, and they ran up to look, but there was no sign of the little Viking.

The children looked everywhere. They couldn’t understand it. After all, you wouldn’t expect to lose a Viking that easily, would you?

‘We’ve got to find her,’ said Katie. ‘She doesn’t know a thing about living around here. What if she gets run over?’

‘Or arrested?’ added Joshua, who had recently had a lecture at school from the local policeman. The children began searching.

It’s tricky to know where to start looking for a Viking, especially if you’ve only known them for a couple of days. And would *you* really feel comfortable saying to people, ‘Excuse me, have you seen a very small Viking who’s a girl and probably about a thousand years old but doesn’t look her age?’?

The children split up to continue the search.

Katie went down to the Pitch and Putt course and looked in all the little buildings. She thought Amber might have fancied the castle and moat at hole number eight, but there was no sign of her. Gary checked under the bushes in the rest of the garden, but then had to stop and rescue Joshua who had climbed up the side of a rubbish skip and fallen in.

‘Amber likes bits and pieces of rubbish,’ Joshua said defensively as his older brother hauled him out and held him at arm’s length because he smelled of old cabbage. By the time they all met back in front of the play tent half an hour later, everyone was feeling rather grumpy.

‘Phew, Joshua, you stink!’ said Katie.

‘I was being thorough,’ replied Joshua, who was also wondering if he should pop inside to the loo quite soon.

It was while they were all heading inside to get a thinking biscuit that Gary spotted some marks on the ground outside the Belchers' house at number 3.

'Look!' he cried. 'Amber's left us a message after all.' The children gathered around a series of scratchings in the dirt.

'What does it say?' asked Joshua. 'It's not proper writing,' he said confidently. Joshua was sure about writing. He could recognize all the letters except S, which he sometimes got back to front. 'It doesn't look like a message,' he continued.

'They're runes,' said Gary, 'Viking letters. They're telling us she's gone on a journey,' he declared. 'Look - that's the symbol for journey and that's the one for sun. I think she's gone on a journey and she'll be back before dark. We don't need to worry.'

The children went and sat by the play tent and, sure enough, before long Amber popped up from behind the mulberry bush.

'Where have you been?' asked Katie.

'I have been on a great adventure in a ship that went across land and journeyed to a place of wonder. Did you get my message?'

'Gary read it,' said Joshua with pride. Gary blushed.

It took them some time to work out that Amber had in fact been to Sainsbury's in the back of Mrs Belcher's old Volvo. The Belcher family were keen on whole foods and usually only ate things that had been soaked overnight. Everyone knew though that Mrs Belcher had a sweet tooth and every now and then snuck off to the supermarket to buy cream cakes. Amber told them all about her thrilling adventure, though she did say that there had also been a strange smell in the car. Joshua explained that the Belchers ate a lot of beans.

'What did Mrs Belcher say about you being in her car?' asked Katie.

'Nothing,' said Amber. 'It was very odd. I tapped her once or twice on the shoulder to tell her a bigger ship was coming

right towards us, and I didn't think she'd seen it, but she just pretended that she hadn't heard me.'

'Maybe she didn't see you,' said Gary. 'Maybe no one can except us.'

'But,' said Amber, 'it was a very good adventure, for I have found the very thing I need.' And she held up a large grey cloth with the words FOR SALE written across it.



'It's a sail for my boat.'

'No,' said Gary, 'it's a tarpaulin with writing. It's a FOR SALE sign from that car on the front.'

Amber eyed him with exaggerated patience. 'It may have been for sale but now it's *for* a sail for my boat.'

That evening, when Night had already begun to ride her horse, *Hrimfaxi*, across the sky and darkness was settling around the house, Katie was finishing her turn at the washing-up. They had left Amber and Ratatosk marvelling over noodles that came in a plastic pot.

'I like your land,' Amber had said, looking at the large garden and poking at something that Gary said was supposed to be meat.

'It's not ours exactly,' Katie explained. 'It belongs to all seven of the houses in the terrace. In the old days it was very smart, and there were big picnics and tea parties in that garden. It's all a bit dilapidated now, but I've seen pictures of when Mum grew up here as a girl, and Mrs Marchmont still had a Mr Marchmont. Our family has lived in this house for three generations.'

Amber nodded. 'It must be a powerful land.'

Katie looked out of the kitchen window at the old garden. Gary was sitting at the table with a library book about boats open in front of him. He imagined the words in runes, as pictures telling him how to calm the seas and find his way by the stars. As he sat there a thought occurred to him: 'By the light of a star, there's no telling how far, a ship could sail over the sea.'

'What's that smell?' asked Mum, coming in with the laundry.

'It's Joshua,' said Katie. 'He fell into a skip.'

Mum sighed, but Gary didn't even notice. He was too shocked as he realized that he'd just made a poem.



Chapter Three

Troll Trouble

KATIE CALLED A crisis meeting. The three Lloyd children and Amber, the littlest Viking, were all to have an equal say. Unfortunately, as it happened, no one had a say at all, because they tried to meet in the play tent in the garden where Amber was living, and there wasn't really room for the four of them. Also Amber's pet squirrel, Ratatosk, kept trying to swing from one tent pole to the other over their heads. In the end the whole tent came down on top of them and they retreated to the bus shelter across the road.

The children all took this minor disaster in their stride. It's amazing what you can get used to if a little girl turns up saying that she's a Viking, a thousand years old and has come to stay, thank you very much.

'Amber, you can't live in the garden any longer,' announced Katie, once everyone was seated comfortably on the wooden bench and Ratatosk had settled down to chew Gary's shoelaces.

'Why?' asked Amber, who had already become rather attached to the garden and the notion of living under a mulberry bush in a tent shaped like a double-decker bus. Despite being Amber, Hammer of the North and a rough, tough Viking, her lower lip began to tremble.

'It's too cold. You'll catch a chill living in that play tent, and Mum says that a chill can lead to all sorts of things.' Joshua wanted to know what sorts of things, but Katie ploughed on. 'We need to find you something else.'

‘Couldn’t we build a log house in the garden?’ asked Amber.

‘It’s not our garden,’ explained Gary. ‘It’s commun . . . commun . . . it belongs to everyone.’

‘No problem,’ said Amber brightly. ‘We’ll do what my cousins do in Iceland. They wanted to make it fair for everyone to get some land, so they have a rule – any man can have as much land as he can travel around on foot with a lighted torch in a single day, and a woman can claim any fields she can cross in a day while leading a two-year-old cow.’

The three children looked at their Viking friend.

‘I know you’re trying, Amber,’ said Katie, ‘but somehow I don’t think that would help.’

‘No,’ said Joshua after a short pause. ‘If we’re not allowed pets, I’m sure we won’t be allowed cows in the garden.’

‘You’ll just have to come and live in the house,’ said Gary, kicking a loose paving slab with his shoe and sending Ratatosk flying into the bus timetable by mistake. Gary was feeling rather confident. He’d won a prize at school for his poem on Viking sailing ships.

‘Mrs Marchmont won’t want a Viking in the terrace,’ said Katie. ‘She was cross enough when Doctor Ativan got a satellite dish.’ Gary kicked hard at the paving stone and scuffed his trainers. Ratatosk wisely stayed where he was.

‘Grown-ups!’ said Joshua with a heartfelt sigh.

‘Do you think they wouldn’t like me?’ asked Amber.

‘It’s not that,’ replied Katie. ‘They’re just . . . well, funny about anything . . . a bit different. I don’t know how we’d tell them. I mean, it’s quite awkward.’

Everyone felt miserable. They got up for a wander around the Pitch and Putt course, but that made them feel even more depressed. It was closed for the season, and there is nothing sadder than a peeling concrete clown’s face in the winter wind.

‘We must get everyone to want a Viking so much that they can’t think how they managed without one,’ said Amber. The children did not look convinced. ‘No, really. People will be happy if they get what they think they want – just like the parents of Peter Ox.’

With that, Amber cleared her throat, ready to tell one of her stories. Ratatosk stopped diving down the tunnels on hole number four, and crossed his paws to listen. The children sat down next to the windmill.

‘My great uncle had a neighbour who was very rich. He was a farmer and he and his wife worked very hard and got richer and richer, but they were sad because they didn’t have any children.’

‘They’d have got on with Mrs Marchmont then,’ muttered Gary. Amber ignored this interruption.

‘One day at market, the farmer saw the most wonderful calf and bought it for his wife as a present. The calf was very beautiful and seemed to understand everything the farmer and his wife said to it. The farmer’s wife named the calf “Peter”, and they both became very fond of it. So fond, in fact, that they treated it as if it were their child.

‘After Peter had lived with them a short while, a new man came to work at the local school. He was very clever and lots of people in the village went to him for advice.

““Do you suppose”,’ said the farmer one day to his wife, “that the new teacher at the school is clever enough to teach our Peter to talk? It would be wonderful if Peter could talk and be like a real child to us.”

‘The farmer’s wife was now so fond of Peter she thought the calf could do anything and so she sent her husband straight off to the school to find out about lessons. The farmer explained to the teacher that he wanted Peter to learn to talk so that he could adopt him and Peter might inherit all the farmer’s money.

‘Now the teacher was very crafty and he realised the farmer wasn’t very clever.

“Of course I can teach Peter to talk,” said the teacher, “but you mustn’t tell anyone. It is strictly forbidden to teach cows to talk, and I could get into serious trouble. I mean, if we taught all cows to talk, you’d never get any peace on a farm, would you?” The teacher also told him that very special and very expensive books would be needed for the lessons.’

Joshua interrupted. ‘I’m not surprised. They’d have to be big books for a cow!’

‘Sssh!’ said Katie.

Amber went on. ‘The farmer brought Peter to the teacher and gave him ten gold coins to buy books. After a week the farmer came to see how his calf was getting on, but the teacher said he couldn’t see Peter in case it made the calf homesick and he forgot everything he had been taught. However, the teacher said that Peter was doing very well and he would soon need another ten gold coins for more special books.

‘This same thing happened every week when the farmer came to visit the school. The teacher would say that Peter was talking away and being very clever, but that the farmer couldn’t see him in case it made the calf homesick. Then the farmer would pay ten gold coins for more books and go home.

‘After a few months, the naughty teacher took Peter and sold him to the butcher. He was just counting his money from the sale of the poor calf when he met the farmer in the street.

“How’s my lovely calf?” asked the farmer.

‘Now the teacher started to feel bad because he had just sold the calf to the butcher, and he wished he hadn’t told quite so many lies to get all the farmer’s gold coins. “I’m afraid Peter’s run away,” he said. “I don’t know where he can be.”

‘The farmer went home and he and his wife cried over their lovely calf who had run away.

'A short while later, the farmer heard about a new arrival in a nearby town, called Peter Ox. Mr Ox was said to be very clever. The farmer was very excited and he called to his wife. "One might almost think that this was our Peter," he said, and off he went to visit him.

'The farmer met Peter Ox in a tavern. Mr Ox was a large man with bright red hair. As soon as the farmer saw him, he thought that he recognized him; the thick neck and broad forehead of the man were just like those of his beloved calf. "This," he thought to himself, "is our lovely calf grown into a man."

"Peter, my son," cried the farmer, and he hugged the man. "How your mother and I have missed you!"

"What are you talking about?" asked the man, who had never seen the farmer before. "Neither my mother nor my father is alive."

"Oh, I know that," said the farmer. "Your real father was sold in the market last Michaelmas and sadly your mother died while calving. But my wife and I adopted you. You will be my heir and you must call me father." Then the father showed Peter Ox all his lands and riches. He was so wealthy that the man happily agreed to be his heir and inherit it all.

'The farmer sold his farm and he and his wife moved into town with Peter Ox where they all lived very happily - and the teacher got ten more gold coins for doing such a good job in teaching the calf to talk. So you see, everyone was happy, because they all thought they got what they wanted.'

Ratatosk clapped his paws together at the fine story and fell backwards down a chute.

'But what's this story got to do with Amber staying in our house?' asked Joshua.

'We have to make everyone in the terrace believe that what they really want is to have Amber come and stay,' explained Katie.

‘Oh, is that all?’ said Gary. ‘And I thought it was going to be difficult!’

‘We must have a plan,’ said Amber, pushing back her small helmet and scratching her head. ‘We need to discover who is on our side and who the enemies are. Once we know the enemies, we can attack them.’

‘Attack?’ exclaimed Katie, not sure that things weren’t getting out of hand. But she was drowned out by the whoops and war cries from the boys, who were already running up to the house. Amber pulled Ratatosk out of the chute and set off with her hand firmly clasped on the hilt of her sword and her helmet pulled down low over her eyes. Katie had an uneasy feeling about it all.

There were seven houses in the terrace, all of which belonged to the Residents’ Association. Katie decided to begin the search for enemies with Mum, as they knew her best and, anyway, it was lunch time. In the kitchen, Mum was looking a bit distracted. You know what mums can get like when they’re cooking and the phone keeps ringing.

‘I’m not having anything to stay that isn’t house-trained. Hello? Yes, this is Mrs Lloyd. The gas board?’

Katie took this to mean a ‘yes’, even though she hadn’t actually explained that Amber was a Viking. Joshua was impressed that Amber was house-trained, as he sometimes still had trouble in that department himself. Gary finished his tuna sandwich and thought it was time to start questioning the neighbours.

Mr Gray at house number 4 was a specialist supplier of plumbing accessories and worked from an office at home. He’d had a nice man from the Inland Revenue visiting all week, and looked rather tired and emotional. He said that he didn’t care who stayed in the terrace as long as everyone got receipts.

Dr Ativan in number 7 was a bit trickier. He came from one of the Eastern European countries that doesn’t exist any

more, and that seemed to make him grumpy. He lived alone and his house smelled of disinfectant and home-made garlic sausages. He was at home when the children rang the doorbell, as he had the man from 'Rid-O-Rodent' in. Katie asked how he felt about a guest from Nordic times.

'Bah!' exploded the doctor. 'Ze Norsemen! Where were they when we needed them?'

'Probably dead,' replied Gary, but Dr Ativan had already slammed the door shut. Katie thought that this was a definite 'no' vote, so Gary put him on the enemy list.

Old Mrs Paling in number 5 was quite deaf, and thought the children asked her if she wanted to 'go biking'. Then her nephew turned up and said she needed peace and quiet and would they please go away.

Pat and Bobby Kane at number 6 weren't at home. They were in show business ('Raising Kane - The Husband and Wife Double Act') and always spent winter at the Tropical Leisure Park in Skegness. Katie put them down as friendly, however, as they always had all sorts of people to stay, including those two jugglers from the Hungarian Navy whom Mrs Marchmont had complained about.

Last came the Belchers, who rented out rooms at number 3. When she wasn't on a cream-cake binge, Mrs Belcher made her own bread, and she had once even tried to keep chickens on the balcony until Mr Gray complained. Gary pulled the short straw and had to go and ask Mrs Belcher. In spite of - or perhaps because of - their healthy living, the Belchers always seemed to have a faint smell of gas about them. Gary gave a slight cough as he opened the front door. He began to explain that Amber was a real, thousand-year-old Viking, but before he could get very far, Mrs Belcher interrupted him. She was happy to have any 'native' person staying in the terrace, however old they were. She also gave him a home-made bun, which was very heavy. Gary thought it might come in handy later on as a weapon.

Amber was waiting for them back in the garden.

‘Well?’ she asked. ‘How many enemies have we got?’

Katie looked down her list. ‘Mr Gray, Doctor Ativan and Mrs Paling against. Pat and Bobby Kane, Mum and the Belchers for. I’m afraid that leaves Mrs Marchmont with the deciding vote.’

Joshua groaned. ‘Not Mrs Marchmont, she’s totally wicked.’

Amber’s eyes lit up. ‘Is she a troll? I could deal with her. I wouldn’t mind even if she has three heads. I could cut them all off as easily as slicing an apple with an axe. Or six heads. Of course, a nine-headed troll is slightly more difficult. You have to try and catch them when they’re going through a doorway.’

‘Why?’ asked Gary, despite the fact that none of this was very relevant.

‘Well,’ said Amber thoughtfully. ‘You see, although I’ve never actually seen a nine-headed troll in real life, I’m sure it would have to turn sideways to get through a door. That would slow it up enough for you to chop at least one or two heads off.’

‘This isn’t getting us anywhere.’ Katie sighed, wondering if they were wasting their time. Yet Amber was off. The little Viking was strutting up and down the garden booming out instructions about trolls in her very loud voice.

‘This Mrs Marchmont is probably very nice underneath. We must simply rid her of the troll hide she is wearing and then she will be on our side.’

‘You know, Katie,’ said Gary, ‘Amber might be right.’

Katie was exasperated. ‘Mrs Marchmont is *not* a troll,’ she shouted, just as Mr Patterson shuffled by on his way to mope over his Pitch and Putt course. Katie waved to him feebly as Gary shoved Amber behind a bush. He needn’t have bothered. Mr Patterson didn’t seem to see her.

‘Amber may have a point,’ said Gary. ‘I know Mrs Marchmont’s not a troll but under all that grumpiness she

might really be nice. We just need to find a way to get to the niceness.’ Amber struggled out from the bush.

‘Yes, you must rid her of her troll hide,’ she repeated.

‘How do we do that?’ asked Joshua, who hadn’t followed the conversation and wasn’t in the least bit surprised to find that Mrs Marchmont was a troll.

‘At home,’ said Amber, beginning to march up and down again and slap her sword with her hand, ‘you take a troll and beat her with the twigs of nine new birch brooms and rub the hide off her in three tubs of milk. Then you scrub her in a bath of last year’s whey, cover her in sour milk and finally rinse her off in sweet milk.’ Amber paused triumphantly to see what the children thought of her plan.

‘There’s a can of evaporated milk in the larder,’ said Gary, ‘but I think Mum said it was past its sell-by date.’

‘We must face the troll and let nothing stand in our way.’ Amber marched up the stairs from the garden and round to the front of the house. All the children followed her.

Mrs Marchmont’s white front door had a large brass door knocker with a face like an Egyptian sphinx.

‘Look,’ whispered Amber. ‘She has gods to protect her. She must be a very powerful troll.’

‘Go and hide, Amber,’ urged Katie. ‘Let’s at least get her used to the idea of a Viking first before she meets one.’

Amber slipped behind a wall as Katie reached up and banged the sphinx door knocker. The sound reverberated through the house, and Joshua decided he would keep Amber company in hiding. The children could hear the tapping of Mrs Marchmont’s cane as she made her way to open the front door. It seemed to take for ever, and even Katie, who as the oldest knew better, half expected to see a troll with three heads when the door finally opened.

‘What do you want?’ asked the old lady dressed all in black.

‘We . . . uh . . . that is, Gary and Joshua and Amb— and I wondered if we could talk to you about a visitor,’

stammered Katie, wishing she'd never started.

'Go away!' snapped Mrs Marchmont, raising her cane in a temper. This was too much for Amber. She leaped up from behind the wall and drew her sword.



'Don't you be horrid, you rotten old troll,' she shouted at the top of her voice, which was very loud indeed and sent Ratatosk scurrying for cover. Katie, Joshua and Gary froze. Amber jumped between them and the old woman, ready to do battle, but Mrs Marchmont seemed to look right through the little Viking.

'I am Amber, Hammer of the North,' continued Amber, a little less confidently.

'What are you children staring at?' mumbled Mrs Marchmont, wondering why the children hadn't at least run off. She stepped back and slammed the door shut so that the sphinx head rattled and banged in fury.

'Should have cut her head off,' mumbled Amber.

'No,' said Joshua. 'Mum would have been cross.'

‘She didn’t see you,’ said Katie. ‘Looked right through you.’

‘Maybe we’re the only ones who can see Amber,’ wondered Gary.

‘Come on, let’s find out!’ shouted Joshua gleefully, pulling Amber in front of Dr Ativan’s house and ringing the bell. Amber stood defiantly with her sword drawn, but the good doctor saw nothing. Neither did Mrs Paling, nor Mr Gray. Mrs Belcher did think she saw a squirrel floating in mid-air, but went back inside and had a cup of camomile tea to calm her nerves.

In the end, the children didn’t ask anyone. Amber came inside to the Lloyds’ house and slept in the bottom drawer in Katie’s bedroom. She liked it straight away. She said it was ‘the very thing’ and fell fast asleep with her head on an old tracksuit top.



Katie wondered if she should have been clearer with Mum about Amber. But, as Gary said, if grown-ups are so stupid as not to see what’s in front of them, then it probably is alright to have a Viking living in your house.



Chapter Four

All's Fair in War

AMBER THE LITTLEST Viking soon decided that she liked living in the Lloyd household. Her favourite pastime was to hold the family hairdryer in front of her and pretend she was trudging across the sands of the Sahara desert with the hot winds blowing in her face. Then she would stop in front of the open fridge door and pretend she'd journeyed to the Arctic. This never lasted long, as she usually saw something new in the fridge to eat and would begin inventing sandwiches. If the other weren't up, she sat for hours in front of the television eating peanut butter, ham and ketchup sandwiches and wondering why the man who did the weather forecasts never answered when she spoke to him.

Mind you, he wasn't the only grown-up who ignored Amber. They all did. No one over the age of twelve seemed to see her.

One morning, while Joshua and Gary were explaining to Amber that the remote control only worked for the television and not on people, Katie burst in looking upset.

'I'm afraid we've got bad news,' she said.

'Are we out of peanut butter?' asked Amber, wiping a last bit of ketchup from her plate.

'No. Mum's had a letter from the Residents' Association.' Katie paused for dramatic effect. 'Mr Gray wants everyone to sell the garden.'

'The garden! The garden!' Amber exploded. 'They can't. Just let me deal with them!' The small Viking began pacing

up and down in a great temper, banging furiously on her helmet.

‘We can’t beat anyone with birch twigs and dip them in sour milk,’ said Gary, remembering Amber’s advice for getting rid of troublesome trolls.

‘No,’ agreed Joshua. ‘They’ll send the social services round.’

‘Can the Residents’ Association really sell the garden, Katie?’ asked Gary.

‘I’m afraid so,’ Katie replied. ‘The plot of land is owned by all seven houses. If more than four owners vote in favour, then that’s it. There’s a meeting tomorrow. I think a property developer wants to build a supermarket.’

The children went out into the garden and looked at the wide, familiar lawns. Frost covered the ground, but here and there a few early snowdrops were beginning to poke up their shoots. Soon the bushes would have their first leaves, ready for playing hide-and-seek among during the summer. The children sat down despondently on the stone steps.

Amber was incensed: ‘Don’t sit down! We need to think of a plan. We need to save the garden.’

‘What can we do?’ said Gary, digging his heels into the mud at the bottom of the steps.

‘When my uncle, Erik the Red, discovered the ice-cap in the north, no one wanted to go there until he had a wonderful idea. All the land was completely white and frozen, yet he called it “Greenland”. He said that people would want to go to the new land if it had an attractive name.’

‘Are we going to name the garden?’ asked Joshua, who couldn’t see what good that would do.

‘We could,’ replied Amber, ‘but most of all we are going to make the garden seem so wonderful that no one will ever dream of taking it away.’

Gary started nodding. ‘I see. We make everyone see how wonderful it is and then nobody will want to sell it.’

‘But how do we do that?’ asked Katie. ‘They can see the garden every day and it hasn’t helped so far.’

‘We can write a letter telling everyone how wonderful the garden is,’ said Joshua.

‘No!’ cried Amber. ‘We must be more cunning than that. We must trick them into it. Let them discover for themselves. Make them believe that saving the garden is their own idea.’

‘What about Mrs Marchmont?’ asked Katie sensibly. She knew that Mrs Marchmont was by far the most troublesome of all the neighbours. But Amber just laughed.

‘Don’t worry about her. Mrs Marchmont is exactly like the old woman who went against the stream. She lived in the next village to us. She was so contrary that even when she fell in the water and drowned, she floated upstream.’

The children exchanged glances and waited patiently. Amber’s stories didn’t always make sense straight away.

Amber sighed: ‘Mrs Marchmont likes her own way. If she believes *you* want to sell the garden, then *she* will want the opposite, just to be annoying.’ Amber paused to make sure that everyone was following her argument before she continued: ‘Now, what do you know about the garden?’

Katie looked at the lovely expanse of grass running up to the avenue of large trees. ‘The garden’s been here at least a hundred years. Mum used to play in it when she was little. Mrs Marchmont must have done too.’

‘Then we must remind her,’ said Amber. ‘Grown-ups do seem to have terrible trouble remembering things. First, we’ll get her to see the garden the way she did when she was a child. Once she’s remembered how lovely it was, we’ll tell her we want to sell it. I bet she won’t agree.’

Katie leaped to her feet. ‘Mum’s got some old black-and-white photographs of the garden. I’ll go and get them.’

The children studied the old photos of their mum in pigtails, playing hula hoop and tag in the garden years ago with a whole band of other kids. Even the grown-ups in

some of the pictures were smiling as they sat eating their picnic teas. Amber, who had never seen a photograph before, sat rubbing the surface of one of the pictures and wondering how they'd captured a child on such a small piece of paper.

'I wonder if Mrs Marchmont has any pictures of herself like this,' mused Gary.

'Don't be silly,' said Joshua. 'Mrs Marchmont was never a child.' The others ignored him.

'Mrs Marchmont might have pictures of herself in her house,' explained Katie. 'Everyone has got some pictures from when they were little.'

Amber said she didn't have any, although her aunt had done a rather nice engraving on a reindeer bone once – but everyone agreed that didn't count.

The children looked up to Mrs Marchmont's balcony. All the houses in the terrace had their main living room on the first floor at the back overlooking the sea and, of course, the garden. Katie was quite sure that Mrs Marchmont, who didn't like children at the best of times, would never invite any of them in to look at photographs. It was a problem. They couldn't exactly climb up onto the balcony and look in through the window.

'Ratatosk!' called Amber and began marching up the steps towards the house as her pet squirrel jumped onto her shoulder. Without another word to the children, she whispered something to the tiny squirrel who promptly leaped up an old bit of trellis along the wall and onto Mrs Marchmont's balcony.

Before they knew it he had slipped through an open window and into the house.

'What's he doing?' whispered Katie.

'Looking for photographs,' said Amber confidently.

'Sssh,' said Gary, looking round and lowering his voice. 'That's stealing!'

Joshua wasn't sure. 'I don't think it is if a squirrel does it.'

In a few moments Ratatosk reappeared carrying a small album. He scrambled back down the trellis.

'Well done, Ratatosk,' called Amber. 'It's the very thing we need.'

Katie was bewildered. 'How did he know what to look for? I mean . . . he's a squirrel!'

'Don't start asking questions like that now,' scoffed Gary. 'Amber's a Viking and we don't seem to be too bothered about that!'

Ratatosk clapped his hands and turned cartwheels as Gary opened the book. Inside, on heavy sheets of black paper, were pasted photograph after photograph of a youthful Mrs Marchmont – Mrs Marchmont running through the garden as a girl, standing beside her father and, best of all, having her wedding photographs taken in the garden.

'She was beautiful,' said Katie.

'Must have been taken before she had her troll hide put on,' replied Amber.

The children began making their plans.

'Remember,' said Amber, 'the plan will work best if all the grown-ups believe it was their idea to save the garden.'

So Katie, Gary, Joshua and Amber began the preparations for a Good-Riddance-to-the-Garden party.

Katie set about making a large board with a display of old photographs showing her mum and Mrs Marchmont, while Gary started work on the invitations. Amber went to look for some tables and chairs in the garden shed, and Joshua followed her. He wasn't very good at invitations – his colouring-in was splendid, but his alphabet was still quite hit and miss. With his spelling the neighbours might have missed the party altogether.

In the shed, Joshua and Amber found several deck chairs, an old wrought-iron table and most of a croquet set. Katie delivered the invitations.

‘You hafn’t come pestering me about zat garden business, haf you?’ snarled Dr Ativan when she rang his bell.

‘Not at all,’ replied Katie in her best-behaved voice. ‘We think selling the garden is a splendid idea, Doctor, so we’re having a Good-Riddance-to-the-Garden party to celebrate getting rid of it.’

‘Oh!’ said the Doctor, completely taken aback. ‘Good idea, good idea.’ The doctor took his invitation and didn’t even slam the door.

In fact, everyone in the terrace was so surprised that the children were in favour of selling the garden that they all agreed to come to the party. Mum even said she’d provide the tea and biscuits, although she did have a slight feeling that the children were up to something. She couldn’t understand what had turned them against their beloved garden.

‘I know we could do with the money,’ she said, ‘but I thought you loved that garden.’

‘We’re not really bothered,’ said Gary.

The day of the party was one of those bright winter days where the blue sky makes you feel as though spring is on its way. Or, as Amber put it, you felt as if you could sail all the way to Valhalla. Gary and Amber set up the table and chairs and Katie carefully carried her board of photographs down to a hiding place behind the mulberry bushes.

‘Now remember,’ said Amber, mustering her troops. ‘You must all be very pleased the garden is going. Tell everyone it’s wonderful that there won’t be anywhere to run around any more or have picnics. Be really happy.’

Mum and Mrs Belcher were the first to arrive. Katie poured them some tea.

‘This is lovely,’ said Mrs Belcher with a smile. ‘I don’t get out enough. I suppose I’m a bit of a party pooper.’

‘That’ll be all the beans you eat,’ replied Joshua. Katie kicked him in the shins.

Mum sipped at her drink and looked out to sea. 'Do you know, I haven't been out on the lawn in ages,' she said. 'Doesn't the sea look blue?'

'I think it's far too windy,' said Katie, passing round the biscuits. 'It'll be much better when the garden's gone. If they build a supermarket here we might not even be able to see the sea from the house. Much better.'

Mum frowned suspiciously as Katie moved on to Dr Ativan. He was standing with Pat and Bobby Kane, who were home for the weekend. Gary was telling them how pleased he was about selling the garden since he wouldn't have to play out any more. He could just stay inside and watch television. The Kanes worked in the theatre and didn't like television. They glowered at Gary.



Amber sidled up to Katie: 'I'm afraid we've got a problem.' The children slipped away round the corner.

'Ratatosk has been spying on Mr Gray,' said the little Viking. 'He's already got all the papers he needs for selling the garden and he's going to bring them to the party for everyone to sign today.'

'But we haven't had enough time for people to realize how much they'll miss the garden,' groaned Gary.

'Whatever shall we do?' wailed Joshua.

'I know the very thing,' said Amber. 'We'll just have to go berserk.'

Katie tried to stay calm: 'Amber, getting cross is not going to help.'

'No, I mean we must frighten off Mr Gray until we've had more time for the garden party. Joshua and I will dress up as berserks and frighten him off while you and Gary keep the party going.'

'I'd like that,' said Joshua. 'What's a berserk?'

'They were great warriors and fierce fighters. They used to wear huge bearskins and run at the enemy rolling their eyes while they bit the edges of their shields and yelled terrible animal noises. It usually frightened the enemies so much that they ran away and no one even had to fight. Joshua and I will be berserks and keep Mr Gray away from the party.'

Katie and Gary went back to their guests.

'Well done for selling the garden, Dr Ativan,' said Katie, patting him on the arm.

'Yes,' said Gary. 'It should make a nice bit of money for all of us.'

The doctor eyed them over the top of his glasses. 'It's terrible to see children zinking so much about money. In my day we would have wanted to keep the garden and run about and play,' scolded Dr Ativan. 'I think it's a disgrace, don't you, Mrs Paling?'

Old Mrs Paling, who didn't hear very well, thought the doctor said she'd got a nice face, and she smiled. She hadn't had a compliment since the last black-out in the Second World War. She shyly took the doctor's arm and strolled off across the garden agreeing with him.

Meanwhile Joshua and Amber snuck into the house to become berserks. They had some trouble finding bearskins to wear - as Joshua explained, nobody did that any more because Mum belonged to something called Greenpeace, which said it was wrong. In the end Amber settled for a pink bath mat tied around her middle and Joshua wore the Thunderbirds rug from beside his bed. Two of Mum's big

saucepan lids did as shields and Joshua insisted on putting the little rubbish bin from the bathroom on his head as a helmet. Ratatosk joined in too, by putting on a tea-cosy and poking his head through the hole for the spout.

The two tiniest Vikings and their squirrel companion set off on their mission.

Mr Gray was feeling very confident. He didn't care about the garden. He'd never played in one as a child and now his bad hay fever meant he didn't want to go in one as a grown-up. He carefully gathered the papers for the sale into a small folder and tucked them under his arm. He wasn't particularly keen on going to the garden party, but it was the perfect opportunity to get everyone in the terrace to sign the sale papers. Nothing would stop him now.

However, as Mr Gray opened his front door, the strangest thing happened. From either side of the step, three terrifying creatures rushed at him, screaming and hollering like demented animals. They were no more than three feet tall but the noise was terrible. One of them looked rather like a small boy wrapped in a fur spaceship, but the others consisted of nothing but an enraged bath mat and a lunatic tea-cosy floating in mid-air. Mr Gray ran inside and slammed the door shut. He blinked his eyes.



'What's the matter, dear?' called his wife from upstairs, where she'd been kicking the tumble dryer.

'Uh, n-n-n-nothing,' stuttered Mr Gray. He shook his head and decided that he really must have a holiday this year. Then, he took a deep breath and opened the door again.

The party was going well. By now even Mrs Marchmont had arrived and was actually chatting with some of her neighbours. Katie brought out the board of photographs, along with Mum's camera.

'I thought we'd take one last picture of every-one in the garden,' she announced.

Mrs Marchmont fixed her with a glare and strode up to the board.

'Where did you . . .?' she began crossly, and then she caught sight of herself fifty years before in her wedding gown under the cedar tree. 'Oh,' she said, sighing, and her face softened.

'I think Mrs Marchmont just lost her troll hide,' whispered Gary. At that moment a great cry went up from the steps and a small bath mat followed by a bedside rug and plastic

rubbish bin pelted down the stairs and into the bushes, pursued by a furious Mr Gray. He would have carried on chasing them except that something looking like a rabid teacosy bit his leg as he leaped off the last step.

‘What on earth?’ cried Mum, who was now even more suspicious of the entire party. Mr Gray sat rubbing his ankle.

‘Good riddance to the wretched garden,’ he muttered. ‘I’ve brought the papers for you all to sign. I think we should do it now.’

Everyone was silent. Mrs Marchmont stepped forward.

‘I’m afraid I’ve changed my mind,’ she announced. ‘I no longer wish to sell.’

‘Neizer do I,’ said Dr Ativan.

‘Nor me,’ added Mrs Paling, who for once had followed the entire conversation perfectly.

Strangely not one of the owners wanted to sell any more. They all turned their backs on Mr Gray and returned to the tea party. He limped around for a while, muttering about profit margins and seizing opportunities, but no one was interested and he soon went home.

Later, all the grown-ups in West Cliff Terrace took a short walk around the garden to enjoy the view. They watched the sun setting across Pegwell Bay before finally going back indoors. Of course, they didn’t really explore the garden. If they had wandered behind the shrubbery to the clearing they would have been very surprised at what they saw. For sitting beneath the mulberry bush was the littlest Viking, wrapped in a bath mat and singing ancient Norse songs of victory.



Chapter Five

The Great Little Dragon Ship

THE AVERAGE VIKING house in Amber's home town was made of dirt, with grass growing on the roof and windows at either end covered with the see-through membrane of a calf's birth sac. This may not seem too attractive to you and me and was probably a nightmare to clean, but to Amber, the Hammer of the North, it was home. She had been living with Katie, Gary and Joshua for over a week now and, however much she loved her new friends, she couldn't help feeling homesick.

'I have to go home,' she announced the morning after the children had saved the garden. Joshua, who had been pretending he was leading a parade around the large gorse bush, stopped in his tracks.

'You're leaving?' he whispered. 'Don't you like us any more?'

'Now, now,' said Amber. 'Let's not have any misunderstandings or you'll finish up like the squire's Bride. I didn't say I didn't like you any more. It's just that, well, I miss my family and it's time for me to sail home.'

'But your boat's all smashed up in the cave,' said Gary, trying to be practical to cover up how sad he felt.

Katie frowned. 'I suppose there's always the dragon boat.'

Amber and the three children set off to have a look, and on the way the little Viking told them the story of the squire's Bride.

'It seems there was once an incredibly rich Squire.'

'What's a squire?' asked Joshua.

‘A sort of rich country gentleman,’ explained his sister. ‘We don’t really have them any more.’

Amber nodded. ‘This one was so rich he could have anything that he wanted – probably ate mounds of peanut butter and never worried about the heating bills. Yet there were two things he didn’t have. The first thing was good looks and the second, because of the first, was a wife. However, because he was so rich, the squire foolishly thought that anyone would be delighted to marry him.

‘One day, the daughter of the farmer next door came to deliver some eggs. She was very lovely and the squire decided he would marry her.

“‘I have decided to get married,” he announced to her as she put down her basket.

““Well, the world is full of wonders,” said the girl, trying to imagine who would marry such an ugly old man.

‘The squire saw she hadn’t understood: “I have decided to marry you.”

‘The girl looked at him. “The world is full of wonders,” she said, “but marrying me is not one of them. I will not marry you.” And she went home.

‘This was quite a shock to the squire. No one ever said “no” to him. He asked the girl’s father to speak to her, but she just laughed and said she would never marry the squire. The squire sent presents and flowers and still the girl laughed and said she would never marry him. The squire was beginning to get a bit desperate and asked the girl’s father what he should do. He knew that the farmer wanted his daughter to marry the squire because he was so rich and the farmer was very poor.

““Why don’t you prepare for the wedding?” said the father, shooing away a tiresome pig. “When everything is ready, send for my daughter as if you want her to come and do some work. Then when she arrives, marry her quickly before she has time to realize what is going on.”

'The squire thought this was a great idea. He arranged a huge wedding feast and invited lots of guests. When everyone had arrived the squire shouted to one of stable lads.

“Go to the farmer next door,” he cried, “and have him send up what he promised.”

'The boy ran next door and spoke to the farmer. “My master’s sent me to get what’s been promised,” he said.

'The farmer nodded. “She’s down in the meadow. Help yourself.” And he went back to his pigs.

'The boy ran down to the meadow where he met the beautiful daughter. “Hello,” said the lad. “I’ve come to fetch what your father promised to my master. He said it’s in the meadow.” The girl looked round. Apart from her, the only thing in the meadow was a small white mare.

“It must be that horse,” she said to the boy. “Help yourself.” And so the boy took the mare back to his master.

'The squire was getting into a terrible state waiting for his bride.

“Did you bring her?” he shouted at the boy.

“She’s standing out by the door,” said the lad.

“Well, don’t just stand there!” screamed the squire. “Take her up to the guest bedroom.”

“That won’t be easy,” said the boy.

“Just do it!” bellowed the squire, trying to button his best shirt. “Get some help if she’s difficult.” The squire threw a boot at the boy as he ran out into the yard.

'The small white horse was a nice creature but she’d never been upstairs in a house before and didn’t want to move. In the end it took six farm hands and a dairy maid to push and pull her up the stairs and into the bedroom where the bride’s dress lay waiting. The boy went back to the squire.

“I’ve done it, master,” he panted, “but it was a terrible job.”

““Is she dressed?” asked the squire, battling with his jacket.

““Well, no,” replied the stable boy, rather surprised at the question.

““Well, get her dressed then,” sputtered the squire. “Do I have to tell you everything?” And he threw his other boot at the boy.

‘The boy sighed and wondered if this job was worth all the trouble. The horse wasn’t too keen on the wedding dress, but at last the boy managed to get it on her and even put a garland of flowers around her head.

““I’m ready,” called the squire. “Bring her down!”

‘The boy hadn’t managed to put the shoes on the mare, who clattered down the stairs with a terrible noise. How the wedding guests laughed when the squire came face to face with his bride!

‘So, you see,’ said Amber, ‘if you let a misunderstanding go too far it can lead you into terrible trouble. I’m not leaving because I don’t like you but because it is time for me to go home.’

‘What happened to the horse?’ asked Joshua.

‘I think the squire took a liking to her and they lived happily ever after, although . . .’ Amber paused in mid sentence.

They had arrived at the giant dragon boat. It looked proudly out to sea. ‘Is it real?’ Amber breathed the words onto the frost air.

‘Sort of,’ said Gary. ‘It came over here from Denmark after the war. It’s a . . . reconstruction.’

‘No,’ said Amber. ‘It is a dragon ship.’

Before the children could stop her she grabbed two of the railings that surrounded the great Viking boat and pulled them apart as easily as opening an envelope.

‘You’re not supposed to do that!’ cried Joshua.

‘*How* did you do that?’ asked Gary.

But Amber wasn't listening. She pulled out a short length of rope from her belt and gave one end to Ratatosk. With a single leap, the squirrel hopped into the boat and fixed the rope to an oar. Then Amber pulled herself up into the dragon ship.

'How is it?' called Katie, keeping an eye out for policemen. Amber peered over the edge of one of the shields.

'It's hopeless.' She sighed.

'Of course it's hopeless,' muttered Gary. 'We can't move the boat and the tide will never come up here. Apart from which I don't suppose the council would take too kindly to lending their boat out to a Viking. I mean, what would we tell them? This Viking came to visit and . . .'

Amber slid back down the rope.

'It's not that,' she mumbled. 'I'm too short. I can't see out to steer.' Amber flapped her arms in despair, like a penguin faced with the inevitability of defeat at a snooker table. There's nothing sadder than a dejected Viking who wants to go home, sitting by a useless Viking boat.

'I know. We must build a boat you can see out of,' said Joshua, who couldn't imagine how difficult that might be and so felt confident in the suggestion. 'What do we need?' He sat down next to his Viking friend.

Amber pushed her helmet back to think more clearly. 'First we need a large piece of wood to make the keel.'

'That's the bottom of the boat,' explained Katie.

Gary decided this might be fun. He got out a pencil and paper. 'You tell us what to do and I'll draw up a plan,' he said.

Amber tried to imagine her father and brothers building one of the dragon ships: 'First we cut the keel to the shape we want, but we leave knobs of wood sticking up to tie the ribs of the boat to. Then we add planks along the side, lashed together with the fine sinewy roots of a spruce tree. After that—'

Gary threw down his pencil in despair: 'The sinewy roots of a spruce tree? In Pegwell Bay? In winter?' He looked at his older sister. 'Katie, this is hopeless.'

'No, it isn't.' Katie squared her shoulders and stood up. 'Come on, we'll just think of some other way of building Amber a boat.' And with that she marched off up the hill.

Back at the house, Mrs Belcher had been having a clear-out. The skip into which Joshua had fallen some days before now contained a whole lot of old furniture that had come down from the attic. A small, narrow wardrobe stood by the side. Katie looked at it critically and then quite deliberately pushed it over.

'Katie!' said Joshua, shocked. 'What are you doing?'

'Making a boat,' said Katie calmly. The children looked at the wardrobe lying on its back and Gary nodded.

'If we take this door off, the wardrobe could be the bottom of a boat.'

'It would need a sail,' said Amber uncertainly. 'And an oar. But it might just be the very thing I need.'

'And how will we get it down to the beach?' asked Joshua, pulling at the large piece of furniture. 'It's really heavy.'

At this, Amber stepped forward. With a flick of her wrist, she lifted the heavy wardrobe with one hand while Ratatosk jumped around on top of it.

'That's one problem sorted,' said Katie. 'Now . . . the sail. What about that FOR SALE banner you found?'

'The very thing,' said Amber, shifting the wardrobe onto her other hand as easily as juggling an orange. 'And my false leg will fit onto the back to make a fine steering board.'

'I didn't know you had a false leg—' began Joshua, but Katie interrupted.

'She means the leg from the shop dummy we found on the beach the first day.'

'Oh!' Joshua was a little disappointed, but went to fetch it anyway.

Amber had already set off marching to the beach, calling over shoulder: 'And then I'll need a dragon for the bow to frighten my enemies and a gold coin to give to the gods in case I get into trouble.'

The others stopped and stared at her.

Amber shrugged: 'These are Viking basics for any journey.'

Gary got the door off the wardrobe and Amber carried the rest of it down to the water-line. From his shed out on the Pitch and Putt course, Mr Patterson thought he saw a wardrobe float past on its own. He really did need to find more things to occupy his mind in the winter.

Joshua found the plastic leg and Amber fixed it to one side of the wardrobe with the toe dipping in the water. By moving the top of the leg she could actually steer her new 'boat'. Then Gary fixed an old broom handle to the cupboard and attached the large FOR SALE banner.

'I'll need some rope to hold it,' said Amber, getting quite excited. 'My aunt makes the ropes at home. She cuts a single, spiral strip out of an animal's hide from the shoulder to the tail. Any animal would do - a whale, seal or whatever. Although, of course, the strongest bond is made from all the secret and invisible things in the world - the noise of a cat, the breath of a fish, the roots of a mountain, sinews of a bear and the spittle of a bird.'

Katie got some garden twine and that seemed to do the trick.

As a finishing touch, Gary cut a dragon's head out of an old washing-up bottle to fix on the front. Amber was very impressed.

'I learned it from Blue Peter,' Gary explained.

'He must be a great man,' replied Amber.

'Is there anything else you'll need?' asked Gary.

'Just food.'

Katie got out a pencil to make a list. 'What sort of food?'

Amber thought for a moment: 'An ox would be useful.'

Katie paused and wrote down: 'Packet of ham.' Then she added crisps and some peanut butter as a bit of a treat.

At last everything was ready. Katie, Gary and Joshua stood quietly with Amber on the shore of Pegwell Bay. Everyone felt that they ought to say something, but no one was quite sure what that something should be. Gary stared down at his trainers, and Joshua fidgeted with something in his pocket, though at least for once he wasn't thinking about going to the loo. Then Ratatosk climbed to the top of the mast in the wardrobe boat and pretended to look out to sea.

It was Katie who broke the silence. 'Will you be alright?' she asked, trying to sound casual, but not succeeding.

'Of course,' replied Amber. 'I am a Viking. I am Amber, Hammer of the North.' She hugged Katie and pressed something into her hand. Then the little Viking turned and pushed the great dragon ship out into the water.

'Wait!' cried Joshua. 'You forgot your gold coin to give to the gods.' He reached into his pocket, pulled out a large plastic gold coin and tossed it into the boat. 'I got it with six Coke bottle tops. That one's Batman. It's my favourite.'

But Joshua's words were lost as the sail flapped and caught the wind. For a moment, the little wardrobe ship with its plastic steering board and red FOR SALE banner stood out clearly against the blue sea. Then it seemed as if the children had shut their eyes for a second. When they looked again, Amber had gone.



Katie, Gary and Joshua stood for as long as they could on the beach at Pegwell Bay, until at last *Hrimfaxi*, the horse of the night, began to ride through the sky. The fog of *Niflheim* started to sweep across the bay.

‘Are you sure she’ll be alright?’ asked Joshua, looking out to sea.

‘Of course, she’s a Viking,’ replied Katie.

‘You don’t think we just imagined her, do you?’ wondered Gary. ‘I mean, no one but us ever saw her.’

‘No,’ said Katie. ‘Look!’ She opened her hand and there lay the small silver hammer of the great god Thor, which Amber had always worn around her neck. ‘She is Amber, Hammer of the North.’



About the Author

Following a first-class degree from Cambridge, Sandi Toksvig went into the theatre, where she both wrote and performed before becoming one of the founder members of the Comedy Store Players. She is well known for her television and radio work, as a presenter, writer and actor.

Also by Sandi Toksvig:

SUPER-SAVER MOUSE
SUPER-SAVER MOUSE TO THE RESCUE
THE TROUBLESOME TOOTH FAIRY
UNUSUAL DAY

HITLER'S CANARY

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